FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

June 14, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Exodus 16:1-5
Luke 9:10-17

"And taking the five loaves and two fish... he gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled..."
-Luke 9:16, 17 (NRSV)

In Studs Terkel's Book, American Dreams: Lost and Found, the author interviewed an interesting cross section of people and asked them what they meant by the phrase, "The American Dream."

A successful business executive put it simply:

> "The American Dream is to be better off than you are. How much money is 'enough money?' 'Enough money' is always a little bit more than you have. There's never enough - of anything. This is why people go on. You always go for the brass ring that's always out there about a hundred yards farther. It's like a mirage in the desert: it always stays about a hundred yards ahead of you. You must go for more - for faster, better. If you're not getting better and faster, you're getting worse." [Ministry, Kenneth Gibble, May/June 1992]

It's commencement season. For the past month or so a legion of wise and witty orators has been on the attack. From graduate schools to grammar schools, from grandiose to modest, from the Ohio State football stadium which seats 90,000 and was nearly full (and by the way, which will get it done in about an hour and a half) to that high school I read about somewhere in the Midwest whose commencement exercises were held for the one lone graduating senior, to churches, including this one, who want to be a part of this very important transition; men and women will be asked to stand up at Commencement or Baccalaureate and think out loud about weighty matters such as "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?" and "How to be truly happy," and "The meaning of success."

Some of those speeches will be - or were - good. Most will be vague and a fair number of those commencement exercises will be quite long... several hours, in a suit and tie, on hard bleacher seats, in a hot gym. I've been there and it's not easy. And a fair number of those speeches will be full of euphemisms and cliches, and in almost all instances the people for whom we do this exercise will not hear much of it. One of my clearest commencement memories is sitting in Ohio Stadium, a very long way from the platform on which the commencement address was proceeding; a Nobel prize-winning chemist, I recall, was speaking about chemistry and nobody, absolutely nobody listening. The Veterinary School graduates were inflating huge rubber gloves with helium and launching them into the air. The M.B.A.s were spraying champagne down on the education majors - an eloquently accurate gesture I thought.

The speeches, I have concluded, are an opportunity for parents and teachers and other auxiliary characters in this drama to think a while about what's on their mind, what's bothering a lot of them actually - what they, years and years after the fact, are still struggling with, namely what is worth the investment of the rest of your life which lies in front of those distracted students on hot June afternoons like an unexplored forest. What exactly is success and how do you know when you have it?

Is the executive's vision of the American Dream it? Is "more - better - faster" the star to which we, knowingly and intentionally, choose to hitch our wagon?

It is the most appropriate question at Commencement exercises or Baccalaureate services and it is a question not limited to graduates, obviously. We struggle with it all our lives. Second and third career choices often express a serious and deep intellectual and spiritual struggle that has been going on for years in the midst, sometimes of visible financial, professional success. What's the journey all about? Where's it going? And will we have the resources to bring it to a successful end - a safe arrival?

There is no Commencement or Baccalaureate in the New Testament. But there is an occasion which ends up functioning like one, the setting is unlikely. One time Jesus sent his disciples out on their own - a kind of internship in discipleship. Off they went to the village of Galilee to do what they had seen him do - proclaim the presence of God's Kingdom, teach and heal. We don't know how that project fared, but we do know that when they returned either exhilarated or disappointed - maybe a bit of both - he suggested some time alone to reflect on their experience... a kind of debriefing retreat, a time to reflect on and evaluate their experience... an important part of any intellectual enterprise. And it is in the middle of this retreat that a large crowd of people, apparently looking for him, discover them.

The sense is that the crowd is an unwelcome interruption. Henri Nouwen tells about a professor who told him how irritated he used to be that students always interrupted him when he was in his study at work preparing lectures, until one day it dawned on him that his interruptions were his work. So Jesus deals with them - speaks, teaches, heals - and when at the end of the day, he is still at it, and the crowd is still there, the disciples, still irritated because their retreat was interrupted, say, "Send them away, let them go now to find food and lodging."

Jesus, the story says, orders the disciples to feed the crowd. What happens next, I think, may have been meant as a joke, maybe even resentful sarcasm. There isn't much material which is in all four Gospels; this story is. In John, it's a little boy who produces the five loaves and two fish. In Luke, the disciples themselves, have this meager food. The sense of it is - "Feed them? That's ridiculous. We don't even have enough to feed ourselves. You feed them."

And so he did.

> "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God,
> King of the world, who bringest
> forth bread from the earth"

He prayed the ancient Hebrew blessing his people had prayed for centuries. No Jew ever prayed those words without remembering that older story, one of the most ancient and precious of their stories, about the people in the wilderness and their hunger and how God provided the manna to eat.

And so they all ate - 5,000 of them and there was enough left over to fill twelve baskets - abundant, extravagant, food for all.

What happened? Western Biblical scholarship has offered plausible explanations.

The manna was the sweet white secretion of a common desert bush which falls at night, crystallizes and is edible.

The feeding of the 5,000 was simply an eloquent demonstration of generosity by the little boy, or the disciple who contributed the food, and it inspired everybody to get out the picnic baskets they had all brought along and to share. I've always liked that one - it sounds like a huge church picnic. Or the generous donation inspired one very wealthy person in the crowd to go to town and buy dinner for everybody. Or, Luke is talking symbolically, the food that was distributed was the wholesome, nutritious teaching of Jesus, real food for the soul. The trouble with that one is that if you're hungry you want salt fish and good stout bread, not platitudes.

I'm not sure we can or should objectify this story. It was obviously a very powerful experience and a very important memory for the disciples. I think it is the day they learned about the big questions - the ones all the commencement speeches try to address - the definition of enough, the purpose of life, the prescription for success and how to provide for the traveling - bread for the journey.

The friends of Jesus are so very human. Faced with overwhelming need, the hunger of 5,000 people and their own limited resources, they come to a very familiar conclusion. We can't begin to deal with the crowd, so forget about it. Let's conserve what we have and take care of ourselves.

And that is exactly what a lot of us conclude is the most appropriate response to the big question. In commencement season the air is full of platitudes about how to live purposefully. But the truth is that many of us conclude that the problems are so enormous - hunger, poverty, homelessness, environment, AIDS - our personal resources pale by comparison. What's the use? We can't do anything significant. And personally the truth of the matter is that the culture says to all of us: "More - better - bigger - faster. If you're not getting ahead, you're falling behind."

"We are the people," John Killinger quips [A God Named Hallowed, p. 43] "who invented garage sales in order to get a little breathing room. We are the generation that literally is choking on its stuff." And novelist Peter deVries, whose tongue is always in his cheek, coined the phrase, "Hand-to-mouth luxury," wondering where the next quarterly installment of taxes is coming from. The poor have no idea, Killinger says, how hard it is to be rich, "always worrying about vandalism, fending off sales persons, brokers, agents, managing portfolios, filling out tax papers, fussing over insurance and retirement and transporting the silverware back and forth from the bank vault whenever there is a dinner party." [p. 44]

Now Jesus was no ascetic. In fact, he seemed to enjoy eating and drinking so much it got him in trouble with the religious authorities. He did not celebrate poverty nor did he condemn wealth. But he did teach and he demonstrated a basic attitude about life which is reflected in how his followers live their lives and use the resources at their disposal and what, finally, the whole enterprise is about.

The word here is simple. Use what you have - don't save it. Share it. Spend it. Give it away. Invest it creatively. It will be enough. You will have enough. You will have more, in fact, than you ever imagined.

It's a basic attitude toward life actually.

> "When Michelangelo died, someone found in his studio a note he had written to his apprentice, in the handwriting of his old age: "Draw, Antonio, draw, Antonio, draw and do not waste time."

That wonderful vignette is in Annie Dillard's fine book, The Writing Life, which is a reflection on the craft of writing but in actuality is an essay on living. She said:

> "One of the things I know about writing (substitute living) is this: spend it all: shoot it: play it: lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book: give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for another place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water.
>
> "Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes." [The Writing Life, p. 78-79]

The word for us in the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is a saving word which means an insight that could save your life. When Jesus shifted the focus from looking at those loaves and fishes as a scarce resource to be saved, conserved, hoarded, to looking at them as a precious gift of God, a resource to be used and shared, he moved from fear to love and from death to life. From despair over the fact that meager personal resources are not adequate for huge problems, to joy over the discovery that when we bring what we have, God multiplies, empowers, creates and provides. [See Henri Nouwen, Lifesigns, p. 69]

The word itself is the bread of life. To know and to live like that is to be saved.

To commit your life - your skills, your education, your energy and passion, your resources - everything to God and God's kingdom on earth, to causes that matter, to the alleviation of hunger, to justice, to peace, to education, to children, to offer up your loaves and fishes is, quite simply, to be gloriously alive. The promise is that when you do that, God will provide.

There will be enough, enough of what you need, and if the truth be told, enough of what you have wanted and longed for, and hungered after all your life - bread for your journey.

Amen.